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ABSTRACT

As his students filed through the classroom door, one college writing instructor thought of everything he did not do. "Too much judge, not enough coach; too much talking, not enough listening." He felt that he had played it safe that first semester--neither hurting his students nor profoundly moving them. For a new instructor, it is hard to give up authority in the classroom, despite the best intentions and a conscientious study of pedagogy. However, what this instructor could not do for himself the first semester of teaching, an earthquake did for him the second semester. While he was away from Los Angeles, California, the earthquake struck. As the new topic around which writing assignments were organized the second semester, the earthquake made his students the authorities; they had to bring the instructor into the discourse, not the other way around. Students built on this shared experience and developed a lively process of consensus and collaboration which they then applied to a range of topics throughout the semester. (TB)

WHEN THE WALLS CAME TUMBLING DOWN: TEACHING IN A (SUPER)NATURAL CRISIS

Nathaniel O'Dell Bleekman

The all-important first semester of teaching was finished. As students filed through the classroom door, I thought of everything I *didn't* do. Too much judge, not enough coach; too much talking, not enough listening. I played it safe, that first semester; I neither damaged nor profoundly moved students. I knew I had been too teacher-centered and that's *after* having read Murray & Elbow & Shaughnessy & various other luminaries the semester before, in my TA prep class. I had known what I wanted to do, but when finding myself on the other side of the teacher's desk it hit me I was the authority, responsible for selecting readings, designing writing assignments, conferring a final grade. I say this honestly (and as a new instructor): It's hard to give up authority in the classroom. Easy to talk about - hard to do. Fresh from that first semester I resolved to make my class much more student-centered. But how?

Taking various rhetoric courses, coming to the understanding that the world would not end if I took risks, and mulling over Kenneth Bruffee's *College English* writings compelled me to experiment in my next class, hand over the reins of authority, and allow students latitude in how and what they learned. I couldn't wait for the next semester, particularly with the first semester out of the way I could pause and reflect, allowing myself vital time for interpretation — of my past successes and failures — and of the upcoming semester (this feeling, by the way, is quite unique: there is no better time than those wishful, productive days before the first day of class). In short, I looked forward to *utilizing* Bruffee's work, but I found myself hung up on exactly how to go about doing it. I knew I wanted a situation where students looked not toward me as the authority figure but toward themselves — again, easy to talk about hard to acheive. Little did I know Nature would give me such a splendid opportunity to effect change.

For while Los Angeles shook to the tune of 6.8, I skied deep powder in Kitzbühel, Austria; while the City of Angels busied herself with the seemingly

impossible task of providing potable water for 600,000 Valley residents, I drank dark beer in smoke-filled taverns. Earthquake? What earthquake? *Noch einmal Bier, bitte!*

Of course I came back to carnage like everyone else.

But what I had struggled with in 15 weeks of teaching the quake solved in 40 seconds: suddenly, my students' greatest common experience, their greatest lesson, was something I could not teach, as I had no authority, no background in the matter. In this regard they could not defer to me, and I could not fall back on traditional teaching methods. Sure, I know what earthquakes *do*, I know I came back to a house in shambles, I know I'm still teaching in a trailer and that it will take *ten years* for this university to fully recover. But all that still doesn't add up to the actual experience of less than one minute of madness. They had that experience — I wanted it.

The earthquake acted as a catalyst, rearranging the distribution of power in our classroom. They now had to teach me, and I resolved to place this responsibility squarely with them. This is how it went:

I knew we would focus on the quake as a central experience throughout the class; bear in mind we opened only two weeks after our normal opening time for the semester (3-4 weeks after the quake) - this was still on everybody's minds. Construction crews everywhere, sizable aftershocks going on daily, devastation all around you - you couldn't forget it. So the first day of class I went in my temporary trailer (still temporary and still there, I might add) as the outsider, the one with little knowledge of their experience. Believe me, I <u>didn't</u> know - I empathized but did not know. For example, I had a student, Shelby, who played on the CSUN softball team, become a short-lived media darling; she & her roommate leapt out their bedroom window of the Northridge Meadows Apartment complex seconds before their first story apartment was crushed by the two stories above. So she narrowly escaped death, & three weeks later she's sitting in my English class (now all students, particularly in

urban environments, go through crises constantly - shootings, deaths, family problems; I have no desire to privilege the quake over those crises, but since our university was the epicenter, this quake immediately became a common experience, something we could all build from, unlike an individual's catastrophe. So we decided to collectively build.

Since I had no legitimacy to their Earthquake discourse, they had to teach me, and each other, about the experience. Journal writings, collaborative writings, close observations (we taught in the shadows of the wrecked parking lot) and lots of group work. We began by trying to come to a common consensus of what the quake felt, sounded like: many students who suffered fires along with the quake realized it was as if "our house had accidentally been built right on top of Hell, as the earth cracked wide open and flames belched out." Focusing on the first terrifying seconds, students wrote "My bed began violently shaking as I was thrown into the air, dresser drawers flew across the room, windows shattered, spraying glass everywhere, and I thought 'this has to be the big one.' " Recalling the silence directly following the quake, they noted "When the shaking finally stopped and the ground quit its noise, a collection of screams, car alarms, dogs and sirens quickly filled the early morning air." In groups, students came to a common understanding of the quake; we defined it in and for our classroom, giving it appropriate meaning. They were writing narratives, based on a common experience while sharing their version of reality, which contributed to the overall experience. In our groups we built layer upon layer of meaning, as students added & deleted text, changed thoughts, argued about emotions. No story was privileged over another, no opinion of the quake was more valued than another.

I wanted to capture these moments of consensus, this wonderful, productive group working, resulting not in "groupthink" flat text but interesting, descriptive prose, filled with meaning and importance — textured prose reflecting the numerous voices comprising it - text the authors were proud of.

And so I took this idea of consensus & collaboration & said "OK - this is what we're going to do for the entire semester - not just on the quake, but on your work, on other students' work, on other essay readings. You're responsible for coming up with the meanings, with the ideas. You're responsible for *successfully* working together, and *together* coming up with what *you* think is the right answer. You people can do it — you have already done it." I thought if we did this type of collaborative learning for the earthquake we could do it for text-based material as well. I wanted that notion of building on the shared experience and building on the process, duplicating that process for different texts. After this 'quake unit' as we began to call it, we moved to a Kate Chopin fable, and it was wonderful to see the students tease out a meaning, debate its merits and collectively agree (or disagree) with the same vigor and understanding they had done when discussing the earthquake. They looked toward each other for meaning, and toward themselves. What they had all undergone was the bedrock upon which we built.

What problem, for me, was solved by the quake? It was the problem many novice instructors have: that of bridging the gap between theory and practice. Not just talking about student empowerment but actually empowering students. By playing the role of instructor the students realized they *could* contribute to a common discourse, that they could question and persuade, that it was OK to argue — and when they saw an instructor who freely declared he wasn't "all-knowing" it made them more eager to become participants in the learning process. I hope in the future the only way I learn something will <u>not</u> be by widespread natural disaster, but for me, learning to teach and learning about the earthquake happened to coincide — we merely used the resources available. And with that, my class and I turned the 1994 Northridge earthquake into just that - a great big teaching resource.